**[Why gaming's gay male representation needs to change](http://localhost:9000/article/id/4)**

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Far Cry 4

In the last few years, games have become increasingly diverse in the characters they show and the stories they tell. From indies like Gone Home and Papo y Yo, to blockbusters like Rise of the Tomb Raider, Wolfenstein The New Order, and Dragon Age: Inquisition, games are more willing than ever to explore the topics of race, disability, gender and sexuality.

But, there is one group that have not had the same advancements in representation: gay men. While we are moving away from offensive and stereotypical portrayals, there are still less tropes that surround gay men that are alive and well in 2016. These narrative shorthands used to represent us are often negative, and the implications they have for both gay men and the wider gaming community can be both disrespectful and damaging.

‘The Gay Menace’

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s Maxwell Roth, Far Cry 4’s Pagan Min, and BioShock’s Sander Cohen all have a few things in common. They are all memorable antagonists of the games they are featured in, known for their sadistic, ruthless actions and theatrical flair. They also all, in Pagan’s own eyebrow-raising words, “bat for the other team”.

Assassin's Creed Syndicate

The problem with these characterisations is not that they are gay. Gay men can be just as nasty and amoral, or as good and kind as anybody else. The problem is that’s that their sexuality is used as evidence for how evil they are. Roth kisses and announces his laissez-faire attitude to sexuality to protagonist Jacob simply for shock value, while Min and Cohen’s flamboyance and ‘stereotypically gay’ demeanour is used to contrast with their ruthless actions.

The underlying suggestion is that gayness is seen as deviant from the sexual standards of a principally heterosexual society,and that if a person’s sexuality is ‘deviant’ in that way, then they must also be more willing to go against the grain in more dangerous ways.

‘Tragically Gay’

Whether or not a gay man in a game is evil, chances are something evil will happen to him.

The Witcher 3 has a character named Mislav. Mislav is a woodland recluse who has tucked himself far away from civilisation. With some pushing, Mislav will reveal that he had a romantic relationship with the lord’s son, Florian. After their relationship had been discovered, Florian committed suicide, resulting in the Lord becoming an alcoholic and the estate he ran falling into disrepair. So many people’s lives were ruined only because two men loved each other, and Mislav had to run away and live unhappily in the woods for the rest of his life.

The Witcher 3

Mass Effect 3’s Steve Cortez, a crew member of the Normandy, is a romance option for male player characters. However most of his story arc revolves around him coming to terms with the death of his husband during the events of the previous game, where he was kidnapped and killed by the malevolent Collectors. While the player can work with Cortez through his feelings and become his new partner, failing to do so causes the trope to reappear as his unresolved grief results in him committing reckless actions that cause his own death.

In these examples, gayness is used as decoration to show how cruel and unforgiving the world is. Some may point to ‘historical accuracy’ to explain why Florian killed himself, but fiction is specifically written and designed to tell a story with meaning the player. By including these narratives, writers are choosing to use gay tragedy as a quick shorthand to make the world seem just that bit grimmer.

Mass Effect 3

It is possible that this trope originated or at least picked up steam from the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century, where so many gay men dying of a mystery disease irreparably linked in the minds of many the idea of being gay with inevitable tragedy. Despite medical advancements improving the prognosis for those with HIV and AIDS, and greater care being taken to reduce the transmission of the disease, the stories we tell about gay men may need more time to move beyond seeing gayness as nothing but death sentence.

‘All or Nothing’

Even when developers have good intentions and want to include gay content in their games, things can, and do, go wrong.

In an effort to allow players of all orientations to engage with their games, some have adopted an ‘anything goes’ approach to their romance options. Fallout 4, Skyrim and Saints Row 4 allow the player character to hook up with any romance option regardless of gender. In order to make these romances fit, they are often written blankly with no mention to either the player character or the companion’s gender or sexuality.

Dragon Age Inquisition

Compare this to games such as Dragon Age: Inquisition, which features gay man Dorian Pavus. Dorian’s backstory and dialogue flesh out numerous experiences he has had because of his being a gay man, and it adds much to his characterisation. Another companion, Iron Bull, is pansexual, and will quite happily sleep with all genders and races, and his experiences also flesh out his character in many more ways than simply how romance scenes play out.

So Why Gay Men?

While the tropes and trends discussed here are often applied to LGBTQ people regardless of their gender, I believe it is a problem that is now skewing towards gay men in particular.

Life is Strange, Gone Home, Undertale and The Last of Us are all examples of excellent LGBTQ representation. But all four of them exclusively show relationships between women or girls (The Last of Us does include gay man Bill, but I’d argue he falls into the ‘tragically gay’ trope discussed above). While characters like Life is Strange’s Chloe or The Last of Us’ Riley are fantastic LGBTQ characters, they shouldn’t be seen as the final goal for representation, especially when there are comparatively so few gay men in our games.

The Last of Us

It feels as if publishers see their audiences as straight males that would respond negatively to seeing male-male romance in their games. This may lead to writers relying on lesbian and bisexual women to cater to diversity, rather than finding ways to make their players care about gay men. Entirely valid discussions of the fetishisation of gay women aside, straight male players are more likely to able to share and identify with an attraction towards a character’s female partner, than if they were playing a character who was attracted to men.

But of course, not everyone who plays games is a straight man. Plenty of players would love to see more games where the target of the player’s romance is a man. And I’m sure there are lots of straight men who would welcome more gay content in their games, as featuring content outside of the player’s own worldview allows for more varied experiences. Even then, for the few who would take issue with that sort of content, is it so bad to challenge their attitudes?

Time For Change?

Proper representation of LGBTQ people in the media is vital. It is a fantastic tool for increasing empathy and acceptance, both with ourselves and with the people around us.

It is important for the LGBTQ people being portrayed, as we often look towards the media and the stories we see to help us understand and contextualise parts of our identity that we either don’t understand or have problems accepting. It is also important to everyone else as well, as it provides a crucial window into how other people live that many may not have readily available to them in their own lives.

While gaming has made great strides with how it puts across many LGBTQ people, that window is still cloudy and warped when it comes to gay men. It is not all bad, though. With mainstream titles like Fallout: New Vegas and Dragon Age: Inquisition, and smaller titles such as Tusks: The Orc Dating Sim, not being afraid to feature numerous, well-written, and diverse examples of gay men, the games industry has a basis to build from in order to improve its representations in the future.

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